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# Some Notes on the Art of the American Indians



Worcester Art Museum

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## SOME NOTES ON THE ART OF THE AMERICAN INDIANS

Even when the Pilgrims were landing on Plymouth Rock there was a thoroughfare across the desert reaches of New Mexico which had known the step of European soldiers and priests for more than three-quarters of a century. This was the trail from Zuñi, the last of the "Seven Cities of Cibola," to Acoma, the citadel near the Enchanted Mesa. On the way lay a big landmark, Inscription Rock, where one may read today the names of the Spanish leaders of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, carved and dated as they left them when they were passing that way, some of them cut right across the face of prehistoric writings as if to suggest a new order supplanting the old.

Wherever Whites and Indians have met the tendency has been toward exploitation, and the Spanish leave some unenviable memories in their train. But on the whole the development which their Franciscans inaugurated among the Indians of the Southwest was culturally of so enduring a quality and so subtle a form, that after three centuries the Indian communities, which are reaping the benefits of it, still preserve a great measure of their native charm.

The Indians of the western United States are of two kinds—the "Plains" Indians who are more or less nomadic—whom we think of as horse-riding, tepee-building, buffalo-hunting tribes; and the "Pueblo" Indians living in their own established villages or pueblos ("the oldest republics on earth") which lie like little island strongholds among the desert reaches of New Mexico and Arizona and which were originally surrounded by drifting seas of marauding Apaches and other nomadic groups.

The pueblos absorbed features of Spanish culture from the sixteenth century onwards, and blended these with their own racial ways, but the latter embody still their strongest characteristics. The Navahos, a nomadic tribe, held commerce with the pueblos and themselves developed highly skilled handicrafts partly under Spanish influence—among which were blanket weaving and

jewelry making. Most of the blankets in the present exhibition are of Navaho weave.

The raising of sheep and goats and the use of their wool seem to have come to the Navahos from the same Spanish sources. By 1800 the wild horses of the plains (which were descended from those which escaped or were cut out from the Spanish expeditions) became numerous enough to play a notable part in the life chiefly of the Plains Indians. Early in the nineteenth century the beautiful "Bayeta" yarn ravelled from captured Spanish uniforms appeared for a time and was a prized feature of Navaho blankets. Some of the blankets shown display the famous Bayeta wool.

The pottery in the exhibition is all pueblo ware, and excepting for the large white Zuñi vessel opposite the entrance with the animal and bird designs on a white ground, it is all modern. This one piece is probably from the early nineteenth century. The animal forms which appear in Zuñi pottery bear an interesting relation to similar motives somewhat similarly composed on the vastly older Rhodian and Corinthian ware of pre-Christian times of the eastern Mediterranean.

The reddish pottery, lent by Mrs. Carey Melville, comes from the Hopi villages. These are the westernmost of the pueblos and are of the purest Indian tradition and their people may be the true descendants of the Cliff Dwellers. Their pottery has long been of extraordinary quality, though a few years ago a softness developed in the body of the ware. Frank Applegate, a painter of Santa Fe and an experienced potter, interested himself in locating the trouble, and found a way of eliminating it without changing the character of the body. This the Hopi potters have adopted. The finest potter of the Hopi villages in modern times was the late "Nam-pey-o." She was a craftsman and an artist of rare distinction.

Of the black pottery, one piece, the broad vessel with a border of knobs, is of ancient form but of modern production, being the work of Mother Swazo. The pottery of this color is generally associated with the Pueblo of Santa Clara, but its production became almost extinct until its rather recent revival. At San Ildefonso, however, Maria Martinez, a pueblo woman of great skill and taste, forsaking the pottery which was typical of her own village, developed a new variant of the black Santa Clara

ware and the remaining pieces of black pottery in the exhibition are either from Maria's own hand or produced under her influence. Her husband Juliano is likewise a skillful potter and designer. The two accompanied the excavators at Sityatki and have schooled themselves in the ornamental forms of prehistoric ware. The combination of dull and glossy texture is not really an Indian discovery, but was suggested by a friend of the Indians at the Santa Fé Museum. Though the combination is not of the Indian tradition all its elements are, and its beauty does no violence to the Indian feeling for design; its presence illustrates a process which no doubt has always been going on, for the pueblo arts were generally responsive to outside influences to a greater or less degree.

The drawings shown, like the other objects in the exhibition, are all the work of Indians. They are not school products. They represent a development of recent years which simply has been stimulated by the Santa Fé Museum authorities. The artists in most cases began as boys in their early teens and through drawing the things which they knew in their own environment have made some interesting contributions to our knowledge of present-day Indian life. Not only have they shown manners, practices, folklore and ceremonials which are well known to all who possess acquaintance with the Indian country, but in some cases they have brought to light existing ceremonials which have long been believed to be extinct. The exquisite technique of some of these drawings may appear to some to savor of sophistication—but the fact is that fine technique is a strong characteristic of almost all highly developed primitive peoples.

The government schools for the Indians have not perceived the possibility of preserving the native arts and crafts, and have generally missed the value and importance of them. "Designs"? said a teacher at the Shiprock Agency School to the writer, "Designs? Yes—the Indians' heads are full of designs. It's all we can do to keep them from making designs." The remark describes a situation. The Santa Fé Museum has, on the other hand, done much to foster the singularly interesting arts which still exist. The Rose Dugan prizes awarded by the Museum at the time of the annual fiesta in August, encourage the best and most original design within the tradition of a given pueblo, also the best and

most original design of Indian character but regardless of pueblo, etc. Their effect is already noticeable. This has resulted in bringing the Indians of many pueblos to the Museum to study the work of their own forefathers—designs which have disappeared from their villages and been in part forgotten, but which exist in fine examples in the Museum collections. In this way a broken tradition is being repaired.

The blankets in the present exhibition were selected chiefly from the collections of the Denver Art Museum and lent through the courtesy of that institution. In the main they are of the famous McNeil collection which some years ago became the property of the Denver Art Museum. The black, white and blue blanket, a forerunner of the "chief" blankets, was lent to the Denver Art Museum for the purpose of the present exhibition by Mr. Charles MacAllister Willcox of Denver, while Miss Anne Evans of the same city has lent a saddle blanket of Bayeta fabric.

Miss Evans has also lent her collection of Indian paintings (which are now to become the property of the Kent School for Girls of Denver). Mrs. Carey Melville of Worcester is the lender of the Hopi pottery, while the Zuñi, Santa Clara and San Ildefonse pieces are from a small collection owned by the Director of the Worcester Art Museum.

G. W. E.



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